DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 332 123 CG 023 381

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TITLE Conferencing with Individual Students To Gain Insight and Guide Learning.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 30p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Behavior Change; Change Strategies; Counseling Effectiveness; *Individual Counseling; Intermediate Grades; *Teacher Student Relationship

ABSTRACT

This study examined conferencing as a classroom management tool in an attempt to determine if working one-on-one for brief periods of time with students would improve their behavior in the classroom. Pre- and post-observations were made using a scale devised to determine the quantity and type of on and off-task behaviors. Three students were studied: one highly involved in classroom activity, one average, and one who was not very involved. Between the pre- and post-observations, conferences were conducted with each student individually over a period of 3 weeks. It was predicted that conferencing with students would decrease their off-task behaviors by targeting and discussing them and by giving them the special attention they needed. Although the post-observation numbers showed that behaviors after the short period of conferencing did not undergo considerable change, the numbers cannot reflect the depth and breadth of what can be learned from talking one-on-one with the students. The limited time available for this project did not allow for significant behavioral change to be demonstrated, but the value of the conferences was evident in what was learned about the students personally, about their likes and dislikes, and about what motivated these children. (Author/LLL)

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Conferencing with Individual Students to Gain Insight and Guide Learning

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Running Head CONFERENCES FOR INSIGHT AND GUIDANCE

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Conferencing for Insight

Abstract

Conferencing individually with students is a time consuming process which takes organization, patience and good communication skills. Most teachers have the skills they need to be successful at conferencing their students. The primary emphasis of this project is to show that time spent speaking directly with children will be valuable to both students and teachers.

The motivation for this study was to use conferencing as a classroom management tool in an attempt to determine if working one-on-one for brief periods of time with students would improve their behavior in the classroom. Pre- and post-observations were made using a scale devised to determine the quantity and type of on and off-task behaviors. Three students were studied: one highly involved in classroom activity, one average, and one who is not very involved.

Between the pre- and post-observations,

conferences were conducted with each student individually over a period of three weeks. Although the post-observation numbers show that behaviors after the short period of conferencing did not undergo considerable change, the numbers cannot reflect the depth and breadth of what can be learned from talking one-on-one with the three students. The limited time available for this project did not allow for significant behavioral change to be demonstrated, but the value of the conferences was evident in what was learned: about the students personally, about their likes and dislikes, and about what motivated these children.

Conferencing with Individual Students to Gain Insight and Guide Learning

Management or discipline problems in a classroom of twenty-five sixth graders include: inattention and apathy, disruptive movement out of seats, talking out of turn or with peers at inappropriate times, and making physical threats to the teacher. Teachers often have problems of the first two types: inattention and talking out. These are problems which need to be addressed.

Stepping back and examining the classroom organization and how the teacher handles the students as a group and individually, the teacher may find a way to decrease the students' inappropriate behaviors and increase those that foster learning. First, the teacher in each case must determine what those behaviors are by making a list of on and off-task student behaviors observed during instruction. Then, informal observations of the entire class can be made to complete the list and get an overall feel for how target students are functioning within the classroom.

The hypothesis is by giving individual students

one-on-one attention, the teacher can target both fitting and unsuitable behaviors. Through conferences, the teacher gains insight about the individual's behavior by communicating directly with the student. The teacher can then analyze the student's progress on classwork by finding out how the student feels about her development. Conference time can also be used to look directly at work in progress and guide the student in making the next step in class work. If each student feels a finer sense of direction and knows that the teacher considers her important enough to conference with, perhaps discipline problems will decrease. By contrasting pre and post-conference observations there will be an anticipated difference in students' behavior after having been conferenced with for three weeks.

In many reading and writing classrooms the approach is for the teacher to work with the whole group, or a small group of students at once: reading together, discussing the text at hand and then assigning some type of response or separate writing activity which will be done by the student independently. If one-to-one interaction between

teacher and student were suggested, the teacher would most likely respond with: "I'd like to spend more time with individuals, but there just isn't enough time in my class period,". It seems impossible to get to every student every day, or even once a week, especially in classrooms where enrollment is increasing.

Research that has been done by teachers such as Nancie Atwell, Donald Graves, and Lucy Calkins, however, seems to counter the complaint that there is not enough time in the day to conference with students (Atwell,1987; Calkins, 1986; Graves, 1983). Although the above authors used writing workshops as their classroom organization, their ideas can be used within other types of language arts classes. Some reorganization of the classroom may be necessary, but it can be done.

Donald Graves addresses the problem of finding time for conferences: "Conferences work because time is used differently by both teacher and child," (Graves, 1983). The students become more independent when they know they will have a specific time to conference with the teacher in order to ask questions or demonstrate

that they have completed work. They are free to move on to their next order of business.

Graves reminds teachers that their first conferences will take longer (Graves, 1983). Eventually, however, both students and teachers will become comfortable talking with each other, and will know what to expect in the conferences. The teacher may also create a system to determine which students the teacher will work with first (those who need immediate help to begin or continue their work), or a reliable schedule of particular students on each day of the week.

"The (writing) teacher takes lessons from children and, in doing so, helps them know what they know," says Lucy Calkins in when she speaks about content conferencing. Calkins's idea of a conference is not a time when teachers "ask brilliant questions or give astute advice," (Calkins, 1986, 124-25) but rather a conversation between the teacher and the children. Teachers need to "give up the active nondelegating, pushing, informing role for another kind of activity," (Graves, 1983) in their conferences with students: the

activity of waiting.

In conferences the teacher allows time for the student to voice a concern, realize out loud that he has a topic for writing or a project, or ask a question. Conferencing with one student at a time allows the teacher the opportunity to listen carefully to what the student has to teach. "Children do have things to teach us, both about their subjects and how they write about them," (Graves, 1983, 91). This can be extended from writing topics and procedures in a workshop to spelling, grammar and novel study as separate entities in a more segregated classroom. A teacher can learn many things about how the student is approaching the separate topics by talking directly with the student.

A classroom with a "true" reading and writing workshop setting (as the above teacher-researchers have proposed; for additional information on writers workshops, see any one of the references which have to do with the teaching of writing) was not available. The results of this study are, therefore, limited. The students in the studied ninety minute language arts

class do, however, participate in the writing process. They also have ample class time for independent work. During independent work time, three students were taken from class individually. Conferences were conducted focusing on their behavior and work in language arts.

Conferencing gives the students and teacher a chance to have specific communications about the work itself, how the students are progressing, and how they feel about the work they are preparing or have prepared. By giving students time to voice their concerns and announce their successes alone with the teacher, they may come to see themselves as people who are important in the classroom. They become people who command respect as learners and as teachers. The teacher has the opportunity to evaluate how well she is doing her teaching job: do the students understand the teacher's assignments?; are the students having trouble getting the work done?; why?; what do they feel proud about?; what suggestions do they have to make the class better? Students' suggestions can then be reflected upon by the teacher. If the teacher truly learns from the students, change in the classroom may occur.

Methods

Subjects

Based on the original plan to increase on-task behaviors, three students were chosen with which to conference. The students' general level of functioning within the language arts classroom was known from previous observation and close work with the students. The three students consisted of: a quiet student, someone who was not performing as actively as she might, an average student whose self-direction might improve with close attention from the teacher, and a highly active student in the class. The difference in the students' activity in the classroom not only served as a contrast, but also was chosen to see if one-on-one could improve even the most active student's behavior. Improvement might occur by prompting him to give others a chance to participate and self-monitor his own activities with his peers.

Students were not chosen based on their standardized test scores, but rather on the general feeling the clinical instructor and researcher had of their performance, based on grades, attention, and

participation in discussions. Two of the subjects are female, the other male. All three are caucasian. The researcher had worked with the three students during the previous semester and believed they would benefit from the intervention.

Apparatus

An observation procedure which quantitatively recorded the number of on and off-task behaviors of an individual student for seven minutes was developed. The behaviors targeted were further divided into three categories: teacher centered, interaction with peers, and independent behavior. (A sample observation sheet is included in appendix A). The total observation time was fifteen minutes. Observations were made during one minute intervals, in which time the researcher made notation of each behavior included in the checklist. After waiting a minute, the researcher resumed observation for a second minute, waited a minute, and so on. Data were collected on four separate occasions, totaling thirty-two minutes of data for each student.

The data from the formal observations suggested a

framework for the first conference with the three students. Research was done on counseling and content approaches to consultation in order to supplement behavior observations in developing conference questions. Based on the research, the experimentor decided that the first recorded encounter with the students would focus on their behaviors in the classroom and what might be done to change unsuitable behavior and reinforce fitting conduct. Jeanne Bleur's work with low achieving students provided several questions on which to focus, (Bleur, 1987). The discussion focused on successes and insufficiencies the students were experiencing concerning classwork and why they thought they were occurring. A list of the conference questions is included in Appendix B.

After the first general conference, the Atwellian format was used. Atwell's approach entails looking directly at the students' work (which remains in <u>their</u> possession during the conference) and guiding them to take subsequent steps toward its completion (Atwell, 1987). Since the class is organized around a notebook with five sections, the agenda for the day (which the

teacher posts on the front board daily) was consulted to approach each section's assignments quickly. A more thorough discussion of the assignment took place only if the students had problems or successes to address.

The final conference returned to some general questions about how the students felt about talking to teachers individually and how it might help them in classwork and behavior. In an ideal situation, these conferences would continue throughout the school year.

After the final conference, a second set of observations were made as a post-conference follow up. The same time frame and observation tool were used as in the first set.

Results

The first set of observations gave focus to the type of behaviors which might be causing problems or successes with the students. K, the inactive student, was on-task 17 times in the thirty-two minutes and off-task 14 times. L, the average student, was on-task 16 times and off-task 12 times. A, the most active student, was on-task 20 times and off-task 10 times.

More specifically, K looked around the classroom during whole group, teacher centered instructional time, a behavior which for the purposes of this study was considered off-task. She did this four times in one fifteen minute time period. In another fifteen minute observation, during a group discussion which was also teacher centered, K looked around the classroom eight times out of the eight minutes she was observed! On the other hand, when K was taking a quiz or working independently (on two occasions), she looked around the room only once in eight minutes for each occasion.

K was out of her seat only two of thirty-two minutes, and was out of the room only once during instructional time, both of which were considered off-task. She also has a peer with whom she feels comfortable enough to ask and answer questions about the classwork; she did this six times during the initial observation set. Although it was originally considered off-task to wait until work time to ask a question about the assignment, K did this (or received help from the teacher) five times, and during conference time she stated why. She also volunteered

answers only four times in the entire observation set.

In contrast, A volunteered answers eight times in just one fifteen minute observation, during a whole class discussion, and was actually called upon by the teacher to answer a question or give a response five of the eight times. He was in his seat with his eyes on his paper almost all of the time when this was appropriate behavior to do so. As a more active participant in the class, however, he also had more off-task contact with his peers.

A exhibited off-task behaviors twelve times in a fifteen minute period. To temper these observations, others around him were talking and making various distracting noises and actions; who initiated the off-task behavior was not be recorded.

L fell somewhere in the middle in the observations. She was in her seat with her eyes on her paper about half the time when this was appropriate. She volunteered answers during a whole group discussion four times, but unlike A, was only called upon by the teacher once. Like K, she spends more than half the time looking around: twenty-two times in thirty-two

minutes.

Donald Murray suggests what is left unsaid in a conference, and the nonverbal clues we receive from a student's eye contact, posture, gestures, and inflection of voice are as important as what is said, (Murray, 1985, 180). A student's freedom to speak with her teacher may be limited by her physical anxieties. On the other hand, a student who feels relaxed speaking with the teacher might feel more at ease making comments and answering direct questions.

K spoke very softly during the conferences, and her eyes were focused more often on her papers or what was going on outside the conference room than on the researcher. Her answers and concerns were voiced hesitantly. Occasionally her responses were drawn out by the researcher by repeating what she said or using follow up questions such as: "Why do you think that?" or "In what way?".

L seemed more at ease talking with the researcher; she would often stray from the topic of schoolwork and try to cover the school gossip of fights, and love affairs. She tended to get up out of her seat and move

back and forth in place; she did this once for eight minutes of an eleven minute conference. Her eye contact was not much different than K's at first, but she responded to the researcher's attempts to catch her eye by looking back. She was easily distracted by outside noise and interferences.

A had the loudest voice of the three students. He answered questions quickly and completely, often without being prompted by follow-up questions. He sat stationary in his chair, kept close eye contact for the most part, and smiled more frequently than the other two students.

A sample transcript is included in appendix C for a closer look at what was actually said in the conferences.

In the second set of observations, K was off-task more of the time than in the first set. She was not facing the teacher during instructions. She was also doing a homework assignment in class while others were presenting, and having private conversations with a peer ten times in thirty-two minutes. L continued to look around during whole group instruction, look

through her papers (ten times in thirty-two minutes), and volunteer answers infrequently. Although A demonstrated less off-task behavior with peers (only six in thirty-two minutes as opposed to seven in fifteen), he was completing independent work and the other students were also busy at work.

Discussions

The second set of observations did not support the hypothesis that off-task behaviors would decrease and more desirable behaviors increase. There are several explanations for the inconclusive data. First, the observations were made during varied activities: whole group, independent and paired work. Students behave differently in different classroom situations. Also, the conferencing period was limited. Perhaps if used throughout the entire school-year, conferencing would have a greater affect on student behaviors. Of course the classroom organization and the fact that the researcher was not currently teaching these students may also have influenced the results negatively. The following conclusions, however, prove that although the study did not support the hypothesized theory,

something of value was learned by its completion.

By talking to individual students the researcher made the following generalizations:

--Students like to play an active role in the class.

--Students like their work to be simplified.

--Students do not like to carry many materials.

--Students like to share work about which they are proud.

--Students enjoy and complete work better when it has some relationship to them or includes their opinion.

--Students like to interact with their peers. We need to find ways to direct this interaction towards on task participation in class rather than off task behavior.

--Students are easily distracted from their work by noise and other students both within and outside the classroom.

--Students are individuals, some are shy and like to keep quiet, and others are self-confident and like to participate and make sure they understand things by asking questions out loud in front of the class. With the students, we need to find ways to let all children become active learners.

Conferencing for Insight

It was predicted that conferencing with students would decrease their off-task behaviors by targetting and discussing them and by giving them the special attention they need. A time limited experience with conferencing is, however, just the beginning. The study might have been more definitive if the researcher/teacher had met with the students over a longer period of time. It might also have been more successful with a different classroom organization. Readers' and writers' workshop settings have time allowed for conferences to take place. Adopting a workshop, however, is decision which must match the teachers' goals and philosophy as well as the school's program for teacher accountability and the curriculum. The clinical instructor is very organized and effective at her job. She has found a way to match her personality with the way she has set up her classroom, and it works. Rather than completely restructuring her classroom, she and other teachers might wish to integrate conferencing within the existing structure of the class.

Conferencing, as Tom Liner says, is not for

everyone (Kirby and Liner, 1988). But it may be for you.

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Appendix A

on off on off on off on off on off on off on off on

ON-TASK
Alone
in seat
eyes on paper
transition
hw complete

Peer
accepts/gives help
asks/answers
chooses to work w/

Teacher
watches during inst.
listens during inst.
asks questions
accepts teach. help
volunteers answers
answers questions

OFF-TASK
Alone
sharp./bath.
look around
needs direction
incomplete hw

Peer
conversation
off-task

Teacher
looks through papers
talks/asks for repeat
waits until work time
does not raise hand
refuses to answer

Appendix B

Conference Questions

Conference #1

What is something you have been successful at in class?

Why do you think you are successful?

What is something you have problems with in class?

Why do you think you are having trouble?

Of the behaviors the researcher recorded during observation, how do you think these (lists on-task behaviors) have an effect on your classwork and participation?

How do you think these (lists off-task behaviors) have an effect on your classwork?

How might you change to improve your behavior?

How might the class be changed to improve your behavior?

Appendix C

Transcript of Student Conference

Conference #1--K

Researcher: When I came in those other times when I didn't pull you, what I was doing was I was observing for two days. Let's see, what were you doing? You were...first you were doing the discussion about one of the Rascal assignments and then you paired off with Michelle...and then this one.

R: First I wanted to ask some questions. What are you all doing? You've finished your science fair projects...

R: What's something that you think you did well on?

Student: Rascal stuff and preposition quiz. I got a hundred.

R: So you did it while it was still fresh in your mind?

S: Preposition quiz was easy.

R: So you knew it pretty well.

R: Has there been anything you're having trouble with?

S: Spelling.

R: The words are difficult.

R: How do you study for the spelling?

S: Mrs. Brooks' steps are...

R: How else do you study for the test?

S: The night before with my mother, she'll give me the words as a test.

R: That's a good way to study. By practicing.

These are some things that I noticed.

S: (Tells me about her "bad" interim report).

R: You're in your seat, eyes on paper, good thing to do, you were watching while she was giving instructions.

All your homework was done.

You were asking each other questions, with Liz I mean.

S: She was telling me what she was going to write.

Sometimes that's a good way to help.

R: These are some things that I thought might give you trouble. Looking around. Going to the bathroom.

Sometimes you just need a break? So long as Mrs.

Brooks isn't giving instructions.

Other kids are doing this too. Mrs. Brooks moves pretty quickly through everything. You were looking through your papers while she went on to something. Do you have trouble keeping up?

S: Yes.

R: What do you think you could do? Do you understand what I'm asking?

S: I think we should just have one notebook.

R: The way your notebook is organized (how I reinterpreted)?

S: Um, I think we have too much work at one time. I think we should hand in one section and then leave it somewhere else.

At home I have a big box I put my old work in...

R: If a lot of people thought that maybe she would change it.

What about looking around?

S: I just like to see what's going on.

R: With everyone else in the class?

S: Or in Ms. M's class

R: With the problems with the interim, do you feel

like that's turned around?

S: Yes. Mrs. Brooks says I have a better grade now.

R: The only other thing I thought was that you don't ask too many questions of Mrs. B do you?

S: I wait until after.

Because that's embarrassing.

R: But sometimes people don't even ask. It's good that you're asking.

Do you ask Michelle?

S: She doesn't know what's going on. I usually ask Liz.

END

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OCTOBER 31, 1991